Everyone loves a mystery—and the person who solves it. The hidden treasure found, the impenetrable cipher decrypted, the cold case cracked at last afford both intellectual and emotional satisfaction. It need not be this way. We can at least imagine a culture in which the creation of the mystery, not its resolution, is celebrated: the treasure so cleverly hidden that it is never found. The modern world, or at least the modern West, rejects that archetype. In our conventional system, mystery is static, resolution is dynamic, and dynamism is heroic. In the myth of ancient Crete, the hero is Theseus, who finds his way through the labyrinth, not Daedalus, who designed it. We are the heirs of that myth. We speak, almost teleologically, of a mystery “waiting” to be solved. An unsolved mystery is an unfinished story.

The “story” of the Voynich manuscript still lacks an ending, six hundred years after it began. Named after Wilfrid Voynich, the colorful rare-book dealer who bought and publicized it in 1912, the
From the Voynich Manuscript, folio 33 verso. Reproduced courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

The manuscript originally consisted of 116 leaves of calfskin parchment (numbered in a later hand), a few of which are now missing. Scholars divide the illustrations into four groups by their resemblance to known subject matter: herbal, astrological, balneological (having to do with healing baths), and pharmacological. These designations can mislead by suggesting that we have some notion of what the images actually depict; we do not. What the manu-
script shows are plants with no counterpart in nature, things resembling star charts but corresponding to no known astronomical or astrological scheme, naked women enmeshed in a bizarre and alien plumbing system (some do appear to be bathing), and what seem to be recipes involving plants as unfamiliar as those of the first category.

The pictures are juxtaposed, and often closely interwoven, with “text” of unknown import, written in an unknown script. We have, in short, no idea what the manuscript says or depicts, who wrote and/or illustrated it, or where or why it was made. Only with regard to its date can we speak with relative confidence: radiocarbon tests conducted in 2009 yield a 95 percent probability that the parchment on which the manuscript is written originated between 1404 and 1458. Chemical analysis shows the inks and pigments used are at least consistent with that date. In theory the manuscript could be later, but this requires us to assume that the parchment sat around for an unknown length of time before being used.

The earliest known reference to the manuscript comes in 1665, when a scientist named Johannes Marcus Marci sent it as a gift to the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher. According to Marci’s letter, which accompanied the manuscript and has been preserved with it to the present day, it was rumored to have belonged to the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II (1552–1612), who was known for his interest in science and the occult. Marci lived in Prague, where Rudolf had held court, and the possibility of a link to Rudolf is further strengthened by the signature on the opening page, faded now to invisibility under ordinary light, of Jacobus Hořčický de Tepenec, physician to the emperor. Hořčický used a title of nobility that he received in 1608, so the signature must date from between that year and his death in 1622. That is the earliest firm evidence of the manuscript’s whereabouts. If Rudolf did once own the manuscript we do not know how he got it, or what prompted him to de-accession it.

Marci also notes that the manuscript had been attributed to the thirteenth-century English scientist (and enthusiastic cryptographer) Roger Bacon. Marci reserves judgment on this rumor, and we now know he was right to do so: whatever its precise date, the manuscript is too late to be Bacon’s work. Voynich, who knew no
more about it than Marci, was more credulous or less scrupulous, probably both. Treating the rumored link to Bacon as a fact, he was able to surround the manuscript with a cultish glamour. What he was not able to do, however, was sell it, and when he died in 1930 it languished in a bank vault. In 1961 another distinguished rare-book dealer, H. P. Kraus, bought it from Voynich’s heirs, but he too proved unable to sell it. In 1969 Kraus donated what was by then widely known as the Voynich manuscript to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

The manuscript has been accessible online since 2004, but the Beinecke and Yale University Press have now supplemented this resource with a printed volume, edited by Raymond Clemens, the library’s curator of early books and manuscripts. The entire manuscript is reproduced: full size (it isn’t very large), full color, and including its distinctive foldouts, one of them equivalent to six normal pages. The result is handsome and serviceable except for the jacket, imitating parchment, whose crackling is likely to draw glares in a library reading room or the quiet car of a train.

The volume includes, additionally, essays by the editor and others on the earliest known owners of the manuscript, the life and adventures of Wilfred Voynich, recent scientific studies of the manuscript, cryptographic approaches to the mysterious “text,” possible alchemical connections, and the manuscript’s reputation as an unsolved mystery. It is disturbing to realize that with the exception of the piece on scientific studies, none of the essays advance our knowledge of the manuscript’s origins or context. Either they deal with less fundamental issues, such as the career of Voynich, or they are of negative import, such as the cryptographic and alchemical studies. What it comes down to is this: the only significant thing we know about the manuscript is its approximate date, and until very recently we did not even know that. We may well ask, Why commission all these new essays, which do not help us understand the manuscript? The answer, presumably, is to introduce newcomers to the problem. But what then? Clemens ends his preface by remarking that “generous margins have been provided next to each photograph – perhaps even for you to work out your own interpretation.” This is misleading, doubtless in all innocence. No attempt at a new interpretation can hope to succeed
without a far deeper understanding of what we know—meaning what we do not know—about the manuscript.

For that understanding there is only one place to turn, M. E. D’Imperio’s classic monograph of 1978, *The Voynich Manuscript: An Elegant Enigma*. D’Imperio’s work is cited in notes to the last three essays but nowhere specified as the inevitable next step. As a cryptographer with the National Security Agency, Mary D’Imperio was one of a group of high-level code-breakers who, in the decades after World War II, tried unsuccessfully to read the manuscript. Her study was an in-house publication of the NSA, and it has only recently been declassified; now it is available online, through the NSA’s website, or in a print-on-demand version. All it needs is a set of up-to-date photographic illustrations to replace the existing ones, which are redrawn from photocopies and look terrible. The volume under review provides just such illustrations, and the two books must be used together. In combination, they form the most powerful tool yet devised for the analysis of the manuscript.

Short of another objective breakthrough, comparable in importance to the radiocarbon date, can the manuscript be understood further through close observation and scholarly legwork? The answer is yes, provided we do not expect too much. A promising place to start is the relation between the script and the pictures. One of the first things we notice about the script is how consistent and assured it is. From beginning to end there are no corrections, no sign of a learning curve. Whether the text is a cipher or a private language, the writer was at ease with it; compare J. R. R. Tolkien’s mastery of the Elvish scripts he invented. Although it may be going too far to suggest that the writer of the Voynich manuscript was a professional scribe, we may speculate that he or she had studied with one, and had imbibed the scribe’s respect for the discipline of writing. The most important research that could be done in that regard is paleographic. The manuscript text is not “real” writing, but it was inspired by “real” writing, consciously or unconsciously. Close examination of the script should reveal mannerisms characteristic of a particular time and place, pointing to the setting in which the manuscript’s creator was trained, and perhaps eventually to that person’s identity.

The contrast with the manuscript’s illustrations could not be more dramatic. In any imaginable context of the early Renais-
sance, the images, regardless of subject, bespeak a complete absence of rigorous training. At best they are clumsy, at worst childish. The handling of color is particularly sloppy. The artist—I suppose we must call him or her that—seems impatient with the most basic task of filling in the outlines that presumably were just drawn. Roots, stems, and leaves, plumbing and bathing fixtures are only partly filled in. Whoever did them seems to have been oblivious to the need for patience and precision.

Against medieval convention and modern expectation, the images appear to have primacy, in the sense that they were done first. Clemens finds this difficult to accept: “It was standard for the text to be written first and the decoration added afterward. Given how intertwined text and image can become, especially in what is referred to as the herbal section of the Voynich manuscript, it is very difficult to determine in what order the text and images were completed. It appears that the easiest approach would have been to draw the pictures first and then insert the text.” Drawing the pictures first and then inserting the text is the only approach that makes sense. Otherwise we would have to imagine the writer knowing the exact subject and size of each picture, and splitting the text, often several times per page, to leave room for them all.

The sequence of operations would almost certainly have been as follows. First someone drew the pictures with pen and ink. Next someone colored them in. This was probably the same person, since the drawing and the coloring are well matched in crudeness. Did the artist draw a picture, color it, and go on to the next, or did he or she complete all the drawings, go back to the beginning and start coloring? It is more likely that the artist would have worked by quires, gatherings of pages which were sewn together to make the complete book. At this point the writer stepped in, working as the layout demanded, sometimes merely inserting a block of text at the top of the page, sometimes working around the images with the assurance of a dancer.

How many people worked on the Voynich manuscript? The question is central to our understanding of the manuscript’s raison d’être. If it were the work of a group of people, even a very small group, that would imply a shared enterprise. Since it is hard (though not impossible) to imagine a team of workers with no comprehension of their project, it follows that the manuscript had
content that could be shared, transmitted, understood: not just by its makers but by some larger group, however restricted. If this is the case, it is likely that the text is indeed a cipher — that is to say, a means of transmitting precise content, but only in highly restricted circumstances. It is also likely, or less unlikely, that the drawings have, or once had, a key which allowed certain people at the time, and could presumably allow us, to make sense of them. The key, if it exists, is contained either in the text or in the most obscure crannies of early-fifteenth-century culture, where no modern scholar has yet looked.

That is one possibility. The other is that the manuscript — text and pictures — is the work of one individual. If this is the case, there is no need to suppose the text capable of conveying information in a coherent way or to speculate that the pictures reflect some incredibly obscure facet of early Renaissance thought. Verbally and visually, the maker was answerable to no one but him- or herself. I incline toward this second interpretation. The script varies slightly from page to page, but possibly no more — pace D’Imperio — than any individual’s handwriting might do over a period of weeks or months, especially if we allow for the variation in pens, inks, and parchment, all of which were handmade. It is easier to imagine one person maintaining that degree of consistency than an apprentice or co-worker following the master’s hand so closely that his or her work is almost indistinguishable from it, without the touchstone of legible script. We may thus visualize the manuscript’s creator first struggling to capture his or her unique visions in the wildly unfamiliar medium of pen and ink and pigment, then commenting elegantly on them, to who knows what effect, using not just an invented script — the equivalent of a cipher — but an entire invented language.

I am not the first person to suggest that the Voynich manuscript might be the product of a single unfettered, even delusional, imagination. It is not, however, a popular view. One of D’Imperio’s colleagues, Albert H. Carter, calls the manuscript “conceivably the work of a wealthy and learned, if deranged, person,” but this notion is cited among explanations that scholars had considered barely possible, including the idea that the manuscript was some sort of hoax. I cannot help thinking that if a network of expert cryptographers worked on the problem for decades without a solu-
tion, there is a real possibility that no solution, in the cryptographic sense, exists. The same applies, mutatis mutandis, to the pictures. The fantastic plants of the manuscript bear a stylistic though not a botanical resemblance to certain herbals of the fourteenth century, but the pipes and tubes and downspouts, and the throngs of virtually identical naked women who seem to inhabit them, have nothing in common with the mainstream art of their time. What they do resemble is the work of later visionary and self-taught artists: what has come to be known generically as outsider art. (The beauty of the “outsider art” hypothesis is that it is so easily disproven. Someone need only provide a credible decryption of the text to prove that it is, in fact, a cipher.)

Suggesting that the manuscript has no solution is not the same as saying that it has no meaning. What I hypothesize is that the manuscript has, or rather had, meaning for exactly one person, its creator. Its meaning for us today is of a very different kind. It fascinates us because, in common with the best works of outsider art through the centuries, it lets us glimpse the working of a mind unaffected by the intellectual and artistic conventions of its time. We tend to equate artistic genius with paradigm-shifting innovation, with the ability to transform convention, to discard some of it and set the rest on a new course, like turning a vast ocean-going tanker. The Voynich manuscript is not like this. Mainstream genius draws strength from the paradigm even while transcending it. Outsider art at its most extreme does not even notice the paradigm, and draws what strength it can from the tragedy of radical individuality.